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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare has brought alive Western society's shared history and culture in a way no other playwright has ever done, and it is his relevance that makes reading his works worthwhile. Community college educators can prepare the citizens of the future to assimilate population trends and technological advancements by giving their students the widest possible foundation on which to build, plenty of historical examples with which to compare, and the language with which to express themselves clearly to avoid misunderstandings. Shakespeare's work survived 200 years of virtual neglect before scholars began to take the plays seriously. What makes Shakespeare's works endure is that succeeding generations continue to gain something from them. Students can learn to navigate a play and have lots of fun doing so. One way to help students deal with the language in the plays is to discuss Shakespeare's contributions to the language and the games he plays with words. It can be quite amazing to hear how differently students read, to see how different their posture and concentration when they act out scenes. After they have had fun acting out scenes, engage them as critics. Let them see how differently each play can be interpreted, and how interpretations change with fashions. Shakespeare is not too difficult for students, he can be relevant to their lives, they can understand him, and they do enjoy him. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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ED 392 048

WHY TEACH SHAKESPEARE?

(OR ANY OTHER DEAD WHITE MALE?)

A paper presented to the

Community Colleges Humanities Association

Washington D.C.

November 1995

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ANN FORRESTER

FALL 1995

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Why Teach Shakespeare?

Or any other D(ead) W(hite) M(ale)?

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Many of us who teach Shakespeare in the Community College setting are aware of colleagues who have doubts about the worthiness of our efforts in this direction.

What possible relevance for late 20th century students can be assigned to, or dredged from, works written 400 years ago? Works, moreover, not even written in a language which is easily understood by us, let alone our students?

My response to these doubts is still being formulated but I am clear that I must ask myself some pretty searching questions in order to articulate answers that satisfy me and the questioners. As part of that process I am asking myself questions:

1. What am I trying to do with and for my students?
2. Can the works of authors long or recently departed help to that end?
3. Does Shakespeare in particular help me and the students?

What do we mean by education?

- **is it merely enough savvy to get by?**
- **to put a meal on the table, and pay the bills?**
- **is it only the ability to do a job competently?**

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I am offering my students the opportunity to take the first steps to becoming educated. They should already be literate (which is the job of K-12) and now, on the threshold of college, they are preparing to become educated. There is an adage about leading a horse to water; as a variation of that I tell my students that I am setting the table withan array of goodies, but it is up to them to walk up the table and help themselves. However, this places the responsibility for the choice of goodies squarely on me.

What do I mean by 'educated'? What goodies should I have on the table?

My aim is to open the doors to something more than a basic job. Something which *may* result in a higher wage packet - although these days that cannot be guaranteed as the reward of an education - but something which cannot help but increase each of them as an individual, something to widen their horizon, something which may stand by them for a lifetime of increased awareness. For many years now, we have been promised increased leisure - no-one said that might come because there were not enough jobs - but we will all need active mental and/or physical capabilities to fill those periods with something other than drugs, crime and boredom.

What constitutes an 'educated' person?

Someone who:

- **can think logically**
- **can relate events vertically and horizontally**
- **can use lateral thinking to take advantage of the unexpected**

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An educated person:

- can think logically, i.e. reason causes and effects, anticipate reactions from actions;
- can relate events vertically and horizontally,
- can use lateral thinking to take advantage of the unexpected;

What constitutes an 'educated' person?

- **is a problem solver**
- **has curiosity - about all things**
- **speakes the same cultural language as other 'educated' people**
- **can do his job more than competently because of an innovative and active mind**

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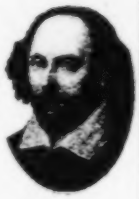
- is a problem solver;
- has curiosity - about all things;
- speaks the same cultural language as other educated people and understands its connotations as well as the denotations;
- can do his job more than competently because of an innovative and active mind;

What constitutes an 'educated' person?



- **can relate to and react with other people**
- **can appreciate another point of view**
- **need not feel inferior in any way because of economic or social factors**
- **can prove his worth in time of crisis**

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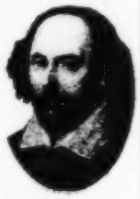
- can relate to and react with other people because of a common and shared foundation;
- can appreciate another point of view because his education will have given him numerous examples of different points of view;
- need not feel inferior in any way because of economic or social factors;
- can prove his worth in times of crisis;

What are we trying to give our Students?



- **Are we trying to extend their horizons - in all directions?**
- **Is there any value in understanding the allusions and references made by other 'educated' people?**
- **How can we understand modern works if we don't understand their foundation?**

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It is up to us as mentors and teachers to extend horizons, to show the values and standards and criteria worthy of emulation and those which are not.

For example, in the matter of good written language: we are assaulted on all sides with bad grammar, poor structure, weak and repetitive imagery and downright wrong word usage in the print media, on the television, on advertisement billboards and frequently in some of the pieces used in modern textbooks.

If you see socks spelt as s-o-x often enough, how are you to know it is wrong? or Photo as F-ot-o? If you hear 'quality' news-readers saying something is "very unique" or telling you "to continue on" or "get off of" -- why should you know it is wrong? It is up to us to help our students accustom their ears and eyes to standard speech and grammar and usage; to understand that there is a time and place where slang or the vernacular is acceptable, and times and places where it is not. There has been much recent discussion of the difficulty many of our students find in adapting their speech to the workplace - but they can do it if they are shown the reasons, the alternatives , and empowered with the ability to know better and the confidence to do better.

Detractors

- **Object to DWMs on principle**
- **Usually benefit from a familiarity with DWMs themselves - so why deny students?**
- **Advance the argument of RELEVANCE only modern works need apply!**

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Many of the people, , who are most strongly against taxing students to learn different ways of thought and expression are themselves those who have already benefited from the advantages of a stringent, thorough education with plenty of exposure to the classics and a cultural heritage which, like it or not, is the cultural heritage of the American nation. Why do they seek to deny the same exposure to the new generation of students?.

They advance the argument of Relevance! What could be more relevant in the late 20th century than an education to fit a student to find interesting and stimulating work, to have leisure and interests beyond that work, and to be able to understand the enormous changes ahead? It is probable that the 100 years between 1899 and 1999 will have seen the greatest technological changes and the fastest rate of such changes than any other in our recorded history. Who can tell what the future will bring? The last US census suggests that by 2050, America will no longer be a predominantly white nation. How do we prepare the citizens of the future to assimilate such changes? I think we do it by giving them the widest possible foundation on which to build, plenty of historical examples with which to compare, and the language with which to express themselves clearly to avoid misunderstandings.

Object to DWMs on Principle

- **Why limit denial to Shakespeare?**
  Why not exclude -
  Homer / Plato / Aristotle .... et al
  Michaelangelo / Botticelli .... et al
  Bach / Beethoven / Brahms ... et al
  Dante / Goethe / Cervantes ... et al
  Sculpture/Architecture /Dance /Theater

9 . . . . . .

Why Teach Shakespeare? If the objections are to age, gender and relevance, why limit the prohibition to him? Why not extend it to all Dead White Males? What would be the result?

Can we even begin to image the impoverishment of our lives and culture if we knew nothing of what existed prior to the beginning of this century? Perhaps some parallel can be drawn with the experience of women who have been deprived of their feminine time-line until quite recently, and who have had to devote energy to continual rediscovery, rather being able to build on what had gone before. How could we understand Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. if we knew nothing of the Old and New Testaments? How would we comprehend Freud's Oedipus Theory if we knew nothing of Greek drama or myth? We have all had students without these backgrounds and seen for ourselves how hard and shuttered life has been for them.

In whatever age 'modern' is, all 'modern' work builds upon what has gone before. Shakespeare rarely uses original plots, he borrows from his predecessors. Without knowledge of history, heritage, of what has gone before, we cannot create today, or make logical rational decisions for a tomorrow. We become a society of serfs, knowing nothing but what is, waiting eternally for a Godot who never comes, unable to lift up our eyes to the nearest hills, let alone the mountains.

Denial of Knowledge to Students

Large ethical question -

- **If we have knowledge - do we have the right to deny it to others?**
- **Do we have the right to say - you don't need this; or, even worse -**
- **Whether or not you need it, I'm not giving it to you?**

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I sincerely believe that there is a very large ethical question raised as soon as 'WE', that is the ones with the knowledge, start saying that 'YOU', that is the ones without, do not need this same knowledge, education and opportunity as WE had.

What right do WE have to make this decision?

What moral, ethical, or legal justification do WE have for such prohibition?

Surely that is a decision for our students' to make? My responsibility and duty is to set the table; THEIRs is to decide whether or not to approach, and whether or not to take up the opportunity.

If they reject the opportunity now, they may well decide to change theirr mind later; if they grasp the opportunity now, they may decide to leave when they are full and cannot absorb more; they may start eating and find themselves unable to stop because of the insatiable curiosity which has been reawoken in them. BUT IT MUST BE THEIR DECISION - NOT MINE.

My duty is to offer them the widest range of experiences I can, and to point the way ahead perhaps to paths where I am not qualified to lead.

Relevance - only Contemporary works need apply!

Who decides what is relevant?

- **How do we judge contemporary works?**
  - **WS was not highly rated by his contemporaries**
- **Is there any value in endurance?**

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Of course, I could be wrong. The student I chide now for writing dangling modifiers, fragments and mixed tenses may be read with awe in 2050. We have precedent for that. Shakespeare was not particularly highly regarded in his writing lifetime. Although his poetry was applauded, there was only a short period at the cusp of the 16th and 17th centuries when his plays were popular with the groundlings and fairly popular at court, but his literary expertise was never highly valued - unlike Marlowe or Jonson; and Beaumont and Fletcher were considered to be better playwrights. After his departure for Stratford around 1611, Shakespeare's works were produced less often during the Stuart and pre-revolutionary years. During the post-restoration he was almost ignored - one play per season if he was lucky! During the 18th century for some reason, interest in his work hung on by a thread although the literati of the day spent most of their energies in correcting his most egregious errors, and lamenting over his propensity to ignore the classical unities and his insistence on writing sad endings to tragedies. It was only towards the end of this period and during the 19th century that scholars began to take the plays seriously and so prime the academic engine which has produced more words than any other field. It is also, incidentally, at this time that the real separation of Shakespeare as text versus Shakespeare as drama comes into play. Of course, the interesting questions to arise from all this are WHY and WHAT? Why did the works survive 200 years of virtual neglect , criticism and interference? What is the intrinsic worth which men instinctively found in them? What were the questions

Endurance

- **What makes a work last?**
- **What values do we gain from it?**
  - **continuity**
  - **history**
  - **foundation**
- **Can modern works offer these, if we cannot put them into perspective?**

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asked for which every generation needs to supply its own response? When we know the answers to these questions, we begin to understand what is meant by literature; and when we understand that, we have a measure by which to decide what to teach our students.

What makes some works last and others fade into oblivion? Surely it must be that we gain something from the one and not from the other, and in the case of Shakespeare and the other DWMs, succeeding generations continue to gain something from them.

It fills me with awe when a class becomes excited and involved with Antigone's dilemma, or irate at the treatment of Shylock, or horrified with the excesses of Macbeth; when they understand Othello because they too have felt the green-eyed monster sitting on their backs; when they delight in choosing the appropriate circle of Hell in which to consign a modern figure, or become involved in arguing the Machiavellian principles behind the decision to drop an atomic bomb. Awe at the skill and perception of these writers, and excitement at my students' recognition of eternal truths.

Most importantly, I think, we gain perspective and continuity. Every great work builds on what has gone before ; it continues a tradition, and celebrates its particular spot in history, and offers us a foundation for further progress.

Perspective

- **Why do we need perspective?**
- **Why do we need a foundation?**
- **Why do we need a sense of place in the tangled yarn?**
- **Can the malaise of the 20th century be attributed to the loss of these?**

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Why do we need a sense of perspective or a foundation? Why can't we define our own sense of place?

There has been a 20th century fashion to under-value history. Our own period is fraught with uncertainties and danger on every level, and across most societies, and the condition seems to be increasing with the next generation - our students.

Is it mere coincidence that this disillusionment and uncertainty follows on the banishment of most historical and literary benchworks in our education system, to be replaced with a narrow focus only on what is necessary for survival? Is it possible that our successors feel no solid foundation (in any discipline) beneath their feet, and this contributes to their lack of purpose? It is very difficult to know where you are going, if you don't know where you came from.

The modern literate world judges Shakespeare to be one of the greatest writers - his contemporaries missed it entirely but that shouldn't deprive us, now, of having access to his genius

Shakespeare
(representing all DWMs)

- **Language**
  - **– student difficulty with**
  - **– sense of achievement with**
  - **– contribution to**

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One of the heaviest weapons wielded against the teaching of Shakespeare is his language - it's full of thees and thous, and shoud'st and had'st; his syntax is complicated and sentence structure leaves much to be desired; he omits words, assuming that the audience is as bright as his groundlings, and will follow the action, and so on and so on.

Yes, his language is different from the one we use today, but so is any language that was not ours from birth, but why should it be too difficult to learn something of the derivations of our own language? If WE could do it, then so can they. I get very angry at the assumption behind this argument, that today's students can't cope with anything difficult. Yes, they can! I've had students say "Oh, I can't do Shakespeare; I'm not smart enough" and I've seen those same students successfully navigate a play and have lots of fun while doing so.

I love to tell students about the innovation and games in Shakespeare's language. The Elizabethans loved puns and hidden meanings, and there's fun in there. I tell students that the Elizabethans and Shakespeare in particular were just like modern Americans - they stretched the language into all sorts of directions where the purists said it shouldn't go, but it did. If you are of a mathematical frame of mind, it is illuminating to plot the various rhetorical patterns; if you are into sociology, watch how a speaker will move from thee to you and back again to convey shades of relationships and conventions.

Shakespeare - Contributions

- **my salad days**
- **the primrose path**
- **the play's the thing**
- **the green-eyed monster**
- **knit your brows**
- **the hollow crown**
- **the game is up**
- **be cruel only to be kind**
- **brevity is the soul of wit**
- **vanished into thin air**
- **more in sorrow than in anger**
- **frailty, thy name is woman**
- **a tower of strength**

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The language of Shakespeare is a never-ending source of ideas and investigation.

The English Renaissance was, like the European Renaissance, a time of richness and exploration in all fields. And language is one of the richest of these. It is estimated that approximately 10-12,000 new words were added during this period, and the majority were contributed by Shakespeare. The roots and sources for this expansion of vocabulary were varied - other languages - French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Dutch - the new sciences of astronomy, anatomy, and physics. It is a marvellous opportunity for introducing students to the idea that language is international and to the ideas of translation between cultures, and cross-fertilization of ideas between disciplines.

And more than an oddity to be studied, Shakespeare's language is part of our language today. I once did Hamlet with a group and a student summed it up by saying, "Yes, it's not bad, but it's full of quotations." She was quite annoyed at me saying don't use cliches and hackneyed phrases, and here was Shakespeare doing it all the time!

Shakespeare - Contributions

- **allurement**
- **emphasis**
- **horrid**
- **it's high time**
- **antipathy**
- **critical**
- **demonstrate**
- **multitudinous**
- **refuse to budge an inch**
- **the wish is father to the thought**
- **set your teeth on edge**
- **to be or not to be**
- **the time is out of joint**
- **the rest is silence**

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We are speaking the language of Shakespeare without even knowing it!

There are no prizes for getting the correct citation for these examples, and I'm sure you can all add to them.

In *The Story of English,* McCrum suggest that Shakespeare had a vocabulary of more than 30,000 words; today's average **educated** man has a vocabulary of 15,000 and many of those words and phrases are culled from Shakespeare.

Shakespeare has brought alive our shared history and culture in a way no other playwright has ever done. He is part of our everyday language, speaks to us about our everyday emotions, puts into words what we can only feel. No other writer to date has expressed so much so clearly, has managed to encapsulate what Everyman thinks and feel.

Shakespeare has in fact become an integral component - of the conventions of Western society, even if some of us don't or don't want to recognize it. He has become if you like the cultural glue of the global society. Without Shakespeare the circles of convention would be farther apart and people without access to Shakespeare find themselves at a disadvantage in literate society. And does this matter for our students? Yes, I think it does. To succeed in the workplace as they move up the ladder, our students need to be able to speak the same language as those around them, to understand the allusions, references and examples.

Shakespeare - Relevance

- **Love**
- **Hate**
- **Jealousy**
- **Greed**
- **Evil**
- **Senility**
- **Beauty**
- **Law**
- **Politics**
- **Commerce**
- **Power**
- **Cheating**
- **Pomposity**
- **Honor**

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What is it then that makes the works of the DWMs worth reading again and again? It is Relevance. The fact that the same problems which worried Sophocles still concerned Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Shakespeare deals with all the universal matters and any one of the Seven Deadly Sins you can think of, and because he was more of a medievalist than a classicist, many of his characters step straight out of the Morality plays: for example, Iago and Richard III personify Vice, Lear - Senility, Juliet - Beauty etc Personification is a strange word to today's student, and would probably muddy the waters, but every girl has been a Juliet and every boy - in his time - has been a Romeo, nearly everyone can relate to the corrosive rage of Jealousy. Shakespeare deals with man's weaknesses and occasional strengths - characteristics which have not changed in 400 years, or 2,000 years or 5,000 years..

All the world's a stage.
And all the men and women merely players:
And one man in his time plays many parts.
...

18

Although I've talked about Shakespeare as a text and in literary terms, it is paramount to remember that he wrote for the stage, that he was an actor and must have been a pretty successful one, since he went on to become a part owner in the profits of the company, and he became a rich man since he bought one of the largest houses in Stratford for his retirement.

Acting a role is an integral part of human life - whether intentionally or not - and it cannot be entirely fortuitous that the earliest fragments of our Western European civilization consist of dramas. Primitive society had, and has, the taking on of roles as a major aspect of symbolic rites. Is it perhaps worth a moment of consideration that Shakespeare, globally acknowledged as a great writer, should also be a writer of drama, of the stage, of acting.

Without becoming too philosophical about it, lets acknowledge the dramatic content of his work by getting the students on their feet! It is really quite amazing to hear how differently they read, to see how different their posture and their concentration when you give them the carboard inner from a roll of wrapping paper to use as a sword, sceptre, magic wand or walking stick. All those strange words suddenly fall into place and become part of the role, and the scene suddenly makes sense. And the fun! It's in the aftermath of a whole class rolling in the aisles at the antics of the three witches in Macbeth that they will accept your wisest words of wisdom.

The play's the thing

. . .

and the video too

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When the students have had their fun, engage them as critics.

Let them see how differently each play can be interpreted, and how interpretations change with fashions. You may be as suprised as I was to find out how instinctively *right* their taste is. I once showed a class four different versions of a scene in Macbeth ranging from a group of young actors who were paraphrasing (because the original was too difficult for students), through a musical production from the Kennedy Center , via a film by Zefferilli, to an extremely stark, bare-bones production from the Royal Shakespeare Company. Without hesitation the class plumped for the last because "the text was better". The Zefferelli film was second choice because it "gave them an idea of the costume and the life of the times" .

So you see, my critics, Shakespeare *isn't* too difficult for students; he *can be* relevant to their lives, they *can* understand him, and *they do enjoy him!*

Why Teach Shakespeare?

How can we NOT teach Shakespeare?

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Of course I'm biased. What you hadn't guessed? Well, yes I am. I began reading and learning Shakespeare when I was eight. He has been a part of my life since I began to realize I had a life. Yes he is relevant to my generation, and yours, and the next, and the next; even Jean Luc Picard reads Shakespeare in the 22 century. I cannot foresee a time when he won't be relevant - well, not until mankind is obsolete and the world is run by computers - and even in *Brave New World* it is the savage who quotes Shakespeare. Can you honestly think of anyone writing in the last 50 or 100 years who comes anywhere close to his achievements? Whose phrases fill our language? Who has given us thousands of new words? Who talks about our problems in ways that our grandparents and our grandchildren can understand?

My question to you ladies and gentlemen is not Why Teach Shakespeare but how can we NOT teach Shakespeare!

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